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THE BIRTH OF ROLAND



MAURICE HEWLETT













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THE BIRTH OF ROLAND

BY

MAURICE HEWLETT

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THE BIRTH OF ROLAND





The Birth of Roland

THE BIRTH OF ROLAND

ILLE was the name of that sister of King Charlemagne who secretly loved and secretly wedded a poor Knight of Brittany called Milo of Ayglent. These two, fast married, who by day could be nothing to each

other, nor so much as look each in the eyes of each for assurance of their plighting, used to meet by night in the pine woods, and then the whole world and the multitude of the starry host held no other souls in bodies; but all the immensity was theirs alone, and for them blew the sweet night airs, and to them only sang the trees their sighed songs. For a season this endured, until Gille in the course of nature must reveal whither Nature had led her. Her state made plain, the great King sent for her one day, and demanded of her the name of her lover. She refused it, for fear of what he would do to Sir Milo, her husband; and when he threatened her with summary death, unblenched she asked him this: "Will you kill two souls at once?" He knew that he dared not do that: moreover he loved her soul better than his

own, and any little thing of hers, even so small a thing as her child by an unknown man, was more precious to him than the iron crown of his majesty. He considered therefore for a day and a night what he should do with her.



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THEN he had her stripped to the smock and set upon an ox-cart alone before all his peers. There as she sat he loved her more than ever in his life; for the tide of her hair, being loosed, flowed over her shoulders like water over a weir; or it was as if the yellow broom should be aflower upon a field of snow. And Gille, being of the same great lineage as he was, in spirit as high, lost noth-

ing of her burning colour, abated no fire in her proud eyes, but sat smiling in the cart, as if it had been a litter to carry her to a King's coronation; and her hands were folded in her lap; and all her hair was about her like a royal cope. No kingly sign upon her was lost to the King, in whom, nevertheless, the love he had for her was chilled suddenly to cold rage. So, hardening his heart, he called out in the midst of the people, "Now, who will drive me this cartload into the waste?" Then Sir Milo of Ayglent lifted up his sword by the point, crying out, "I will, O King."

King Charlemagne, frowning deeply, says, "By what right, Milo?" Milo answered, "By the best right in the world. For a priest has blessed the marriage, and the child that shall be born shall be lawfully thy nephew."

The King looked terribly upon him. Black as thunder were his brows; but Milo did not blench for that. So presently Charlemagne said, "Take that which is yours, and go, and see my face no more." Then Milo got into the cart and sat upon the bench beside his lady wife; and he gathered up the ropes and struck the oxen with the goad, and drove away towards the sunset. And King Charlemagne sat alone in his royal house for seven days; for of all his kindred, and passing the love of any man for his kindred, he loved Gille the fair. After that he went warring in Saxony, and forgot the shame upon his house, as a man should, in work rather too hard for any man to do. There gat he the acquaintance, the love and service of Ogier, the Dane, as may elsewhere be related; but neither there nor else-

where, in field, on throne, in bed, at board, did he forget his fair sister Gille whom beyond all people in the world he loved.

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Now Sir Milo drove his wife in the cart into his own country in Brittany, but not to any town, burgh or castle which might have called him lord. Lord though he might be called of them, all the land knew the great King for overlord; nor might any harbourage be found in all broad France for a man proscribed. Rather, he turned his oxen's heads towards the wilderness and took her deeply within the enchanted forest of Broceliande, and hid her in a cave hard by an open lawn. Little recked she for that. She made no complaint, nor asked of him miracles, neither asserted any right of King's daughter or woman with child. No, but she turned him, rather, a smil-

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ing face, and put into his failing heart great store out of her own. Indeed, she comforted him, who ought to have claimed all comfort, and touched his cheek with her hand when he seemed weary and inclined to be mopish. So, when he looked down to see what it was that she needed, he found her brave eyes upon him full of trust, and saw her mouth ready to be kissed.

What man could be sorrowful, having such delight close at hand, or feel himself poor with such treasure in his cart? Thus do brave women hourly for the men they love, but thus do not men. Now, there in Broceliande, under the green leaves, a child was born, and christened by his own father, and had the name of Baldwin. That was the first born of Gille, King Charlemagne's sister; and after him, for two full years she had no child.



The Birth of Roland

II

NOW, when the child Baldwin was two years old, and it was Midsummer Night, Gille the fair was alone with him in Broceliande. It was dark in the forest

and quite still; and in the cave it was dark where Gille sat alone by the couch of her son. Sir Milo was gone away these two days or more, as had become his custom every quarter of the year, seeking to learn the whereabouts of King Charlemagne, his wife's brother and lord, whether he was in Saxony or elsewhere in Paganry, or come back to France. For two or three days he had been gone, and could not be back for as many more. For him adventure in the world, for her waiting at home. This also is the pleasure of men and the lot of women.

Now the large stars shone out above the trees like the lamps of a town afar off; in the leaves whispered the night wind; she heard the owls cry, the foxes bark. Then presently she lifted her head and looked sharply aside, as he does who listens intently. She heard

a horse come at a walking pace through the forest, breaking dead wood and brushing through undergrowth on his way. She thought, "Here is my lord come back before the time;" and her heart beat for the pleasure of him. So then she stooped down, to be sure that her son slept, and rising quickly fetched meat, bread and a skin of wine. These set in order, she went out into the night to meet him, and presently made out before her a horse like a great ghost, and upon the saddle of him the rider, a hood over his head, in his hand a tall spear. Much she marvelled at the sight, saying to herself, "Thus went not out my Lord Milo, but returns with a spear against his thigh. And his horse, which was a bay, is now a white horse. It must be that he has fought with some strange knight and prevailed against him, to take away his

horse and spear." So then, nothing doubting, she runs on and takes the horse by the bridle, and lifts up her face to be kissed, saying, low and glad, "Welcome to my lord." He, without word said, stoops toward her and touches her hair. The horse is tethered; she takes the rider's hand and leads him to the mouth of the cave. There she disarms him, and marks, by the feeling of it, how fine the harness that he wears, and marvels greatly that he will not suffer his hood to be taken from him, nor say a word to her. So falls she to also to be silent, and to tremble also; for she knows without speech that he has come back with love for her in his heart, and tells herself that this night she will get a child. Then she leads him into the dark cave and plies him with meat and drink, and kneels beside him ministering in



the dark. Little says she, and he nothing, but he embraces her with his arm. and gives her kisses now and then, After he has done with food and drink he takes her in both his arms, and she needs nothing that he cannot give her. So they go to bed, and towards morning she sleeps; and waking finds his place empty, her husband gone again on his horse. But she is comforted with the thought that love for her called him home out of the middle of his affairs, and is well content to wait his pleasure when he shall come again. He comes not home again for three days, but then brings news that the King, her brother, is back in France with much spoil from Saxony and a kingdom to add to his other kingdoms. Nothing has he to say of his silent visit; nor spear nor fine harness brings he back again. Gille thinks to herself,

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"He has again fought and has suffered overthrow. Best were that I say nothing." But she finds anon that she is with child and tells him of it. Little or nothing says Sir Milo, whose misfortunes have made him glum.

In the springtime of the year the child was born, and named by herself Roland.



The Birth of Roland

III

THIS second child of hers Gille suckled for two years; for she said, "It never fortuned a woman to bring into the world so fair a child, not since the mild Mother of Christianity bare her

Son, who is the Saviour of men. And it was written of him, 'Blessed the womb that bare thee, and the paps that gave thee suck.' So now might it be said of me in after time, that I nourished a frere in Christendom, and so it shall be that he shall eat and drink of me so long as my force endures." And it was so; and the child grew up to be as strong as Baldwin, his elder brother, and much more beautiful. Baldwin favoured his father, being dark and heavy-faced as he was, slow in his motions of mind and body, and deliberate; but Roland was wholly after the mould of his mother, as fair and fierce as she, with hair of her golden colour, and complexion of fire. His eyes were colour of blue flowers, his cheeks were of flame, and his mouth very red; he had small hands and feet, a deep chest and narrow hips; his little ears were



set far back on his head. He was flat in the arms and buttocks; the calves of his legs were as hard as a man's saddle. The two boys loved each other well; but as time went on it was so that the will of the younger outvailed the will of the elder, and was the law between them.

Now when Roland was six years old there came into the forest of Broceliande the wise Duke Naimes of Bavier with thirty esquires, seeking the whereabouts of the King's sister. For King Charles himself had sent him, saying, "Ride you east and ride you west, but by all means find her, and prevail upon her to come with you to Laon, and to me, she and all that she has." So Duke Naimes rode east and west, and quartered all the woodland places, and rode deeply among the trees; and this he did for two and

twenty days. Anon, as he and his company dipped down a valley of rocks among stems of the silver birch, and forded a certain river, and began to climb the ridge that was on the other side, the Duke Naimes reined in his courser, and "Ha, Christ," he said, "whom have we here above us?" Then they all looked up, and saw, and he also saw, two naked boys stand upon the ridge with clubs in their right hands, one black-haired and swarthy, the other shining like a gold-haired seraph, his body like the rose of dawn. They stood clear against the morning sky, as it might be two angels guarding the gates of Paradise. Then said Naimes, the wise duke, "Prick on, sirs. Here have we whom we seek." So he gathered up his reins and mounted the ridge, his company behind him; and they came up against the two boys,



Roland namely, and his elder brother. The Birth of Roland

Now must Duke Naimes do one of two things. Either must he ride them down, or again draw rein. It was the latter he did, and his esquires also, and sat still and looked at Roland, saying after a while, "Fair son, let me pass on my road."

But Roland said, "No passage," and the Duke again, "How is that then?" Then said Roland, "Good sir, because we stand in the way;" whereupon he, "By my head, the best reason in the world. Yet if I had thy leave to pass, what then?"

Says Roland, "You have it not;" and Baldwin nodded his head, and repeated after his brother, "That is the case: you have it not."

Duke Naimes looked from one lad to the other, wondering how he had best deal with the pair of them.

By and by says he, "Look you, fair sons, I am come ambassador from the side of the King to your lady mother. You will not deny me the privilege of envoy. If I am sent by a King I may surely look upon a King's sister. Or do you tell your father, Sir Milo, that Naimes of Bavier is on his borders, and so be contented with what he says, as I will be." Then the two lads consulted together, and afterwards Roland spake to the Duke.

"Sir," he said, "the truth of the matter is that our father is not here, but is away on his affairs, leaving our mother in charge of us. Consequently, as you perceive, we stand upon strictness."

"I do perceive," said Duke Naimes. "Nevertheless I also stand upon strictness, considering myself as an ambassador." So said, he held Roland with



a keen eye and waited to see what he would say or do. Roland, frowning, pondered the matter.

Then he said, "Sir, if it be so, as you report, that you come from the King, my uncle, I think that I will take you before my mother. But these lords of yours must await you here."

"It shall be as you decree, fair son," said Duke Naimes. "Yet these are my esquires, and claim no such title as you give them." Roland, angry at the mistake he had made, grew red. Nevertheless he put his hand to the bridle-rein, saying to his brother Baldwin, "Lead with me." And so he did; and in this fashion the great Duke Naimes of Bavier was led before the King's sister, having no other escort than two mother-naked boys. She, too, though she was barefoot and bareheaded, received him as a queen upon

the degrees of her throne might greet a pompous embassage.

But when Gille had heard the proposal that he made her on the part of the King, her brother, she gave him clear refusal.

"My brother's love for me," she said, "was testified by his driving me out into the waste and leaving me for nine years there, to live or die like a beast of the field. I will not go to him at Laon nor at Aix, nor shall my sons go. But if he pleases to come here to me, where he has put me, he shall not be denied. Enough said. Sit you down now, my Lord Naimes, and my sons shall serve you as becomes them." So he did, and so was served as she said by those two boys with meat and drink. Baldwin carved the meat and set it it before him on a wooden trencher; Roland brought the wine in

a bowl, kneeling as he offered it. Naimes had no eyes but for him. "Madam," he said, "this lad should be a king some day."

"How then, my lord," quoth she, "Hath my brother no sons?"

"He hath none after the fashion of this one," said Naimes, "nor so near the fashioning of himself."

"This son of mine favours me, I think," said Gille, and Duke Naimes answered her, "Yes, madam, indeed. And your favour is that of the King, my master, who but for you is without peer in the world." Then he thought for a space, and afterwards lifted his hand up, saying, "I am very sure of this, that here is lodged a heart without fear," and he touched Roland on the bare breast; "And here a tongue without guile," and he laid a finger upon his mouth. Then he looked

gladly upon the child, and of Gille asked this question, "What evil beast, or what felon man in this forest doth he fear?"

Gille said, "He fears no man, nor no beast."

Then said Naimes, "I serve, as I suppose, the bravest man alive; but I tell you that I may yet live to serve a braver."

So he turned to Roland and said this, "My son, I am old, as thou seest, and bear about me such marks of honour as a man of my years may receive. Thou bearest few enough of such things, seeing thy years be few. Yet look thou now how I, Naimes of Bavier, do pay honour where it be due." So said, he knelt down before the young boy, having bared his old head, and he stooped and kissed his knee. Roland, wonderful, looked to his



mother for direction, who through eyes all dim with tears answered him fondly. "Kiss Naimes, my son," said she. So Roland stooped down and kissed Duke Naimes upon the lips.

After this the great man went his way back to his company, escorted out as he had come.







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IV

WHEN he was gone, Duke Naimes with his company, Roland drew his brother Baldwin after him into the deep forest and there talked with him.

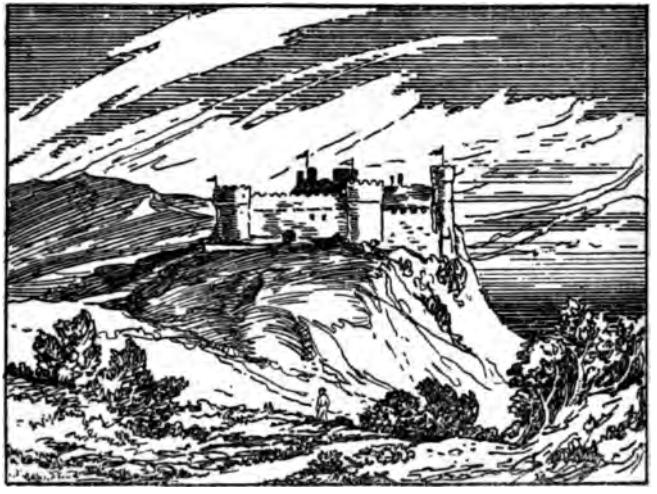
"Who thinkest thou is this King,

our mother's brother?" he asked, and Baldwin said "He is King of the world."

Then Roland, "So he is King of this forest, and of us?" And Baldwin, "He is our uncle and lord."

But Roland said fiercely, "Dost thou call that man lord who useth our mother in such a fashion? That will I never do."

Baldwin heard him, and shook his head, thinking such words dangerous. Roland hereafter kept his own counsel.



The Birth of Roland

V

Charlemagne, the King of Christendom, made no sign for a year or more, then sent letters to announce himself. He was come, he said, to the confines of his forest of Broceliande,

to a castle which he had there called Sounes, and required the attendance of Dame Gille with her two sons. But to his letters the lady would make no answer, although Sir Milo, her husband, was of another opinion. "Lady," he said, "We go against loyalty and our profit at once by too much stiffness. King Charles is your lord and my lord, and the fortunes of our sons are in his hands." But she flamed to a clear, high colour and refused to go to Sounes; so Sir Milo, loving her much, said no more, though he went heavily and full of care. All this debate was heard by Roland, that burning image of his mother, and pondered deeply in his heart.

Night and day he thought what he should do until he was fully resolved; and then at last he rose up before the sun and sought about the cave, where

they all slept upon leaves and fern-brake, for wherewithal to make himself a coat. His mind was made up that he would go to the King himself at Sounes; but he must have some covering for his body, for he remembered how Duke Naimes had looked at them when he saw him and his brother naked, and would not be reproached by King Charles. But all he could find in the cave was an old cloak of his father's, slashed and shredded by age, and the red colour of it stained, now white where the sun had bleached it, now black where the weather had fouled. Again, he found a blue gown of his mother's; and of the two of them he contrived to fashion him a coat, red before and blue behind. He carved out the coat with his father's sword, and sewed it together with strips of reed; so clothed, he went

away early and sought King Charles at Sounes Castle.





The Birth of Roland

NOW the King sat in his hall, at the high table, alone in his state; and esquires served him on their knees; and after kneeling, one rose and filled his gold cup, and

VI

another set meat upon his golden platter. Below him in their order sat the peers. Turpin, the archbishop, was there, Duke Naimes of Bavier, Duke Goeffrey of Anjou, who bore the Oriflamme, which was formerly called Romanc. There were also Thierry, that duke's brother, and Ogier the Dane, and Aymon of Dordogne, and Ganelon, son of Goeffrey, son of Doon of Mayence, and Samson, Duke of Burgundy, and Anseis, the old man. Nine peers were there in those days; but when Oliver and Roland and Renau of Montauban came to manhood, then the peers were twelve and their deeds filled the world with light.

Tne doors of the hall stood open, and in the court was a multitude of the poor, to whom the King gave meat and drink. Into the number of them came Roland, the fair child, in his coat



that was red before and blue behind, and saw the servants come out with meat, bread and skins full of wine, to feed the poor withal. And the boy grew fiery red, and fire burned in his blue eyes as he thought to himself, "To this horde must be added my mother, a King's daughter, if she were to come as she were told. Shame were it, and I had rather die than see her here." So said, he pushed a way for himself and stepped in the doorway and walked up the hall.

It was as if the sun was shining in, when Roland came into the hall. He walked up the centre of it between the tables of the peers and great vassals, and stood before the dais whereon, in the chair of state, the King sat at dinner. "Now who is this fair child, whose hair is like a seraph's of the light, and his eyes blue as the sky, and

his face dawn-colour?" So asked King Charles of himself, and so asked each peer of himself; but only Duke Naimes of Bavier had the answer, and he kept it close in his old heart.

Now stands Roland with his foot upon the dais, and looks at the King, his uncle. Into the King's beard goes the King's hand; and he frowns upon the child, "What seekest thou here of me, child?" saith he then.

"Meat for a King's daughter," then says Roland, and mounts dais, and takes up the King's golden platter. All the peers stood up in their places, all save Ganelon of the race of Doon, who sat where he was, watching and judging.

Not a word said the King, but looked sharply at Roland; who then laid hands upon the golden cup and took it.

"Ha!" cried King Charles, "what



wilt thou have with my cup?"

"Wine," said Roland, "for a King's daughter." Up then gat Ganelon, of Doon's unhappy race, and cried out in full hall, "Lord, wilt thou have this rascal whipped?"

"I will not," said King Charles, who then put his royal hand upon Roland's shoulder, saying, "Take thou my cup and platter, and say that I come presently to thy mother." Roland knelt before the King and kissed his knee, even as Duke Naimes had kissed his own. And then he went back through the forest and put the cup and platter before his mother. She, with full heart and full eyes, sought the eyes of Milo, her husband; but he would not look at her, nor commend Roland for what he had done. For he himself came not of royal race, but had been taught obedience unto kings, and loyalty and humility.





The Birth of Roland

VII

UPON the next day came King Charlemagne in his winged helmet of gold; with his scarlet cloak upon his shoulders, whose morse was made of gold and amethyst; by his thigh

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his miraculous sword Joyeuse, in whose pommel was hid the head of the spear made holy by the piercing of our Saviour's side; in his right hand the lance of his towering pride. About his white horse were his peers, and behind him and them rode sixty lords, men of renown; who thus rode all through the forest ways to the lawn where was the cave in which Gille the fair had lived and borne her sons. And there, before this intolerable glory of gold and harness and great horses, see Gille the noble lady in a frock of coarse flax. And all her mantle was her gold hair, and for hue royal her own bright blood burning in her cheeks. There, also, behind her, stood Sir Milo of Ayglent, her husband; and on either side of her stood a son, Baldwin on her right hand in a bliaut made in the fashion of Roland's, being blue before and red be-

hind, and Roland in that which he had made for himself, being red before and blue behind.

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Then Gille rose and went forward to meet the King, her brother, taking a son by either hand. "Sir, I pray you deign to enter my house," she said, "and welcome shall you be." King Charlemagne dismounted from his horse and took Gille by the chin, and kissed her. "I will come in gladly, sister," he said, "for you have him with you in whom I am most glad." From her to Roland, from Roland back to her he turned his looks. "Blood of your blood, sister, and of your flesh the very flesh is this lad. Now, for his sake, I pardon you your trespass, and for his sake I make Milo an earl."

"Sir," said Gille, "my son shall render you the good that you do to me and mine. He shall be, as you are, a

champion of Christ; he shall carry on his shield the blazon of many realms; into King's platters he shall put his hardy hands, and out of King's cups shall he drink red wine. Even as you are so shall he be."

"Yes," said King Charlemagne, "this boy shall be my peer, and a falcon of the true faith." And he looked long at his sister, and marked how her colour rose high and bright.

As for Roland, when the King was not looking at what he did, he took the great sword Joyeuse by the pommel, and lightly pulled it out of the scabbard. Backwards and forwards he swayed it in his hand, then tried the temper of it in the ground. "See, mother, how it bends; like a whip it bends," he said; and she bade him give it back. But the King said, "Ah, my son Roland, a sword, Durandal, shall



be thine, which is, next to this Joyeuse, the greatest sword in the world. Wieland made it, and Malakin gave it me as ransom for his brother Abram: that was in the vale of Maurienne long ago. Three times shalt thou let it go, once by ruse, and once to serve thy friend, and once by thine own fault; but in the end it will be thine again; and in death-time no many living shall take it from thy hand. This I know from soothsayers, and visions revealed—but these things are not yet. In the pommel of it there are wondrous things: a portion of Our Lady's smock, a tooth of St. Peter, a phial of St. Basil's blood, and some of the hairs of the head of St. Denis."

Roland said, "Where is that sword?"

"It is at Laon, my city," said the King; and Roland, "Then I come with you to get it."

"That shall be so," said King Charlemagne, and neither Gille nor Sir Milo had any words to gainsay his words.

Then Roland kissed his mother, father and brother, and was set before King Charlemagne on his white horse, and held in his hand the miraculous spear of pride. And so he left Broceliande, and abode with the great King until the years of his pupilage were ended.



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